

Khajjiar :

The 'official' Switzerland of India

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An exotic place that contains snow capped mountains bordering the horizon and lush green patch of valley under clear blue sky is often compared with Switzerland irrespective of its geographical location. There is atleast one Switzerland like place in every country and some of those indeed have stunning resemblance with real Switzerland. Many years ago none other than Mahatma Gandhi called Kausani, the hill retreat of Kumayun Himalaya as Switzerland of India. Many love to call Pahelgam of Kashmir as India's Switzerland. The list is considerably long.

However this is a little known fact that in India there is a place which is indeed certified as little Switzerland considering its beauty and weather. This certification came from a Governing body of Switzerland itself and now a proud board installed at Khajjiar of Himachal Pradesh proudly giving this testimony. Today at various points of Khajjiar milestones and sign boards proudly remind that Switzerland is just 6194 km away from this little Switzerland. It all happened on 7th July 1992 when Willy T Blazer Vice Counselor & Head of Chancery of Switzerland crowned the place.

Needless to say such a candid and proud declaration is not seen any other hill station of India and here at Khajjiar evidences are plenty in support of such tall claim.

The mind blowing beauty of Khajjiar then a part of undivided Punjab first mesmerized none other than Lord Curzon. His old paper clearly mentioned the exotic beauty of this place and many years after that a team from Switzerland came here to check how common the physical factors of this place is with their own country. Khajjiar smoothly qualified in the verification and thus came the certification.

Even a stone of Khajjiar was collected and transported to Switzerland as a mark of sample of this place.

The place needs no certificate from any other country.

It just needs a silent and relaxed heart of a wanderlust who is already battling with pollution and bustle. Nestled on the lap of deep deodar and fir forest the valley is the theatre of beauty. Its green carpet of grass contains mosaic of meadows that all run towards the horizon bordered with a pageantry of Himalayan

peaks of Dhauladhar range. The crystal clear blue sky reflects the sunshine in most elegant way making the atmosphere magical and engrossing.

There at the middle of the valley prevails a small stream fed lake again covered with weeds. Known as Khajjiar lake the saucer shaped lake houses a floating island which is nothing but some overgrown grass at the mid of the water body. Legend has it that inside this lake resides Khajjiar nag, the serpent God after whom the place is named. Here in 12th century or so one Chamba king named Preeti Singh established Khajjiar Naga temple dedicated to snake God and Lord Shiva. The temple has excellent wood carvings and its dome is covered with gold. It enshrines idol of Pandava and Shiva along with a small temple of Hidimba the demon daughter married to Bhima as our epic says. A small golf course near the lake is just an icing over the well baked cake.

Near that river Ravi flows over rocky riverbed. Sound of its stream creates a symphony if heard in right moment while overlooking the green curtain of forest.

Few km from Khajjiar is Lakkarmandi a small human settlement. From here another 8 km steep upscale journey will take one to an elevation of 2500 mt which was once a gaming reserve for royals of Chamba kingdom. Today it is an open wild life sanctuary covering an area of 69 sq km. From early 1970 this forest was notified as sanctuary. Thanks to its deep shadowed surface of blue pine, dense coniferous and green oaks the forest is called Kalatop. One needs to be very careful here as there is no jeep safari or guided tours.

Though animal sighting is rare but this is house of leopard and Himalayan black bear. Needless to say any encounter with any of these can turn deadly. Other common wild life found here are langur, jackal, Himalayan black marten, barking goral and many more. Among rare birds species like Eurasian Jay, Black Headed Jay, and the Black Bird are often spotted. However as it is an open forest an encounter with the animals is high in possibility. So it will be better not to take any risk in the name of adventure.

The romantic touch of the Kalatop is a more than 100 years old British forest rest house which is available for staying. The typical European forest house still equipped with running fire place and chimney depicts everything that is vintage.

One having interest in Hindi movies can easily recognise that two block buster of Bollywood named **1942 - A Love Story** and **Lootera** were shot here. In winter the entire area is covered with thick snow. Needless to say such a harsh climate also attracts people from all corner of the world.

The vegetation of Kalatop WLS also includes rhododendron of different colours but the most breathtaking view of Kalatop is the peerless panorama of Dhauladhar range of Himalaya that almost looks like a razzmatazz of models walking on the ramp one after another. Very few hill stations of India gives one to see such broad and clear panoramic view as it is seen from here. Dhanikund (2755 mt) one of the most famous peak of the region can be seen from here.

Khajjiar and nearby Kalatop WLS have not yet committed the sin of making things worst in the similar way as overcrowded hill stations like Shimla, Shilong and Darjeeling. It is still free from illegal construction and the forest cover is still more than adequate. Else the man-animal fight would have been high. The forest guest house provides accommodation at very low prices.

Switzerland or no Switzerland, Khajjiar and Kalatop WLS are two gems in Himachal. If tourist influx is restricted with logic soon people who love to roam in unknown yet beautiful place will love to settle here.

Travel Logistics :

Dalhousie is the nearest big town from Khajjiar.

FRH can be booked in advance.

Various outdoor sports are provided to tourist at Khajjiar.

Kalatop has no jeep safari - So please do not take risk in roaming inside the sanctuary without guide.

Pathankot is the nearest railway station and Kangra is the nearest airport.

Kalatop has 2 FRH - One new and one old.

(PICS: SOMEN SENGUPTA & ARANYO SENGUPTA)